



## Seattle's Comprehensive Plan Update

### **ISSUE PAPER #3: South Lake Union as an Urban Center**

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Since the Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1994, South Lake Union has experienced substantial job growth, beyond that anticipated when the plan was adopted. This growth is expected to continue into the future. The update of the Comprehensive Plan provides an opportunity to look at how the City can best plan for future growth in this neighborhood. Below, growth trends in South Lake Union are compared with those for the other six Hub Urban Villages and five Urban Centers. Following a review of these growth trends and the insights they offer a discussion of how to best plan for future growth in South Lake Union is presented.

#### **Background**

Seattle's Comprehensive Plan designates the South Lake Union (SLU) neighborhood as a Hub Urban Village. This means development in this neighborhood is planned to be of a character and of sufficient scale to support pedestrian activity, transit use, and increase opportunities within the City for people to live close to where they work. The Comprehensive Plan establishes growth targets for South Lake Union consistent with this goal and with the existing conditions of the neighborhood when the plan was adopted.

While housing growth has matched expected growth levels, job growth in this neighborhood already exceeds its twenty-year growth target. The number of dwelling units in SLU increased by 741 between 1994 and 2003. This growth is consistent with its twenty-year growth target of 1,700 dwelling units. Employment growth in SLU has exceeded its twenty-year employment target of 4,500, gaining approximately 5,950 jobs between 1994 and 2001. This level of growth represents 132% of its twenty-year employment target.

The numbers are only one part of the story. The spike in job growth is a function of the neighborhood's emerging position as a regional biotechnology hub. This focus on biotechnology is the result both of major private investment in the neighborhood and support of the Mayor and City Council. Specifically:

- Since the Comprehensive Plan was adopted, major biotechnology investments have been made in the South Lake Union neighborhood

including projects by the University of Washington, Seattle Biomedical Research Group, Fred Hutchinson, and Zymogenetics.

- The Mayor and the City Council have placed a high priority on developing South Lake Union as a biotechnology hub. In the March of 2003, the Mayor announced a South Lake Union Action Plan to promote economic development, with an emphasis on biotechnology, in the South Lake Union neighborhood. This action plan includes major transportation improvements including a street car system linking South Lake Union with Downtown Seattle and improvements to the Mercer Street corridor.
- The City Council recently adopted zone changes raising height limits, but not permitted floor space, for buildings in South Lake Union to allow for the greater ceiling clearances required by biotechnology firms.
- A number of biotechnology and housing projects have been proposed for the neighborhood.

The update of the Comprehensive Plan offers an opportunity to reevaluate the role of South Lake Union in the city's overall growth management strategy and to open a discussion of how to best plan for this neighborhood.

### **The Role of Urban Villages**

The Countywide Growth Management Policies establish 14 urban centers as the focus of regional growth. Urban centers are envisioned as areas of concentrated employment and housing, with direct service by high-capacity transit, and a wide range of other land uses such as retail, recreational, public facilities, parks and open space. Five of these urban Centers are in Seattle. Seattle's Comprehensive Plan builds on the Urban Center approach by establishing two urban village classifications in addition to Urban Centers. These urban village classifications are Hub Urban Villages and Residential Urban Villages. South Lake Union is one of seven Hub Urban Villages in Seattle.

In designating South Lake Union a Hub Urban Village, the comprehensive plan anticipated a mixed use neighborhood located strategically on the city's transportation system. The South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan similarly anticipates a mixed use neighborhood emphasizing small business and light industry. While growth trends since the plan was adopted conform to the vision of a mixed use development with greater emphasis on business than housing, the emergence of major biotechnology presence has spurred growth in ways that differ significantly from this earlier vision of South Lake Union and from development in other Hub Urban Villages.

## Hub Urban Village Comparison

Housing growth in the seven Hub Urban Villages combined, was planned to be approximately 9,000 dwelling units over the twenty-year life of the Comprehensive Plan. Actual housing growth between 1994 and 2003 for the seven Hub Urban Villages was approximately 3,778 dwelling units. This gain in dwelling units represents 41% of the twenty-year growth target. Total job growth in the seven Hub Urban Villages was planned to be 21,400 over the twenty-year life of the Comprehensive Plan. Actual job growth between 1995 and 2001 was approximately 7,844 jobs. This job gain represents 37% of the twenty year growth target. While this rate of growth is consistent with the twenty-year growth target, it is largely driven by growth in one Hub Urban Village – South Lake Union. When job growth for the South Lake Union Hub Urban Village is not included in this analysis, the total number of jobs created is 1,897. This represents approximately 11% of the twenty-year growth target for the remaining six Hub Urban Villages. In the tables below, specifics for each Hub Urban Village can be found.

**Table 1: Hub Urban Village Job Growth**

Hub Urban Village	Employment Growth 1994-2001	Twenty Year Growth Target	Percentage of Growth Target Met	Zone Capacity	Estimated 2010 Density (jobs/acre)	Employment Density 2003
Ballard	55	3,700	1%	9,200	22	11
Bitter Lake Village	1,013	2,800	36%	23,300	20	15
Fremont	817	1,700	47%	2,300	25	23
Lake City	-86	2,900	-3%	6,900	18	9
North Rainier	-152	3,500	-4%	10,500	17	8
<b>South Lake Union</b>	<b>5,947</b>	<b>4,500</b>	<b>132%</b>	<b>28,123</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>
West Seattle Junction	250	2300	11%	2,500	24	15

South Lake Union has led job growth among all Hub Urban Villages. While existing conditions at the time job-growth targets were established explain some variation in the rate of job growth, South Lake Union is alone in the degree to

which growth has occurred and the degree to which it can accommodate future job growth.

- Job growth targets for Hub Urban villages range from 1,700 jobs (Fremont) to 4,500 jobs (South Lake Union).
- Of the seven Hub Urban Villages, South Lake Union is the only one to surpass its growth target, gaining approximately 5,000 more jobs than the next closest Hub Urban Village – Bitter Lake Village.
- Three Hub Urban villages achieved 1% or less of their growth target with two (Lake City and North Rainer) actually losing jobs.
- In terms of capacity of existing zoning to accommodate future growth, South Lake Union has the greatest capacity, followed closely by Bitter Lake Village.
- The concentration of jobs per acre in South Lake Union is substantially higher than for the other Hub Urban Villages. South Lake Union currently has 44 jobs per acre with Fremont being the next closest with 22 jobs per acre.

**Table 2: Hub Urban Village Housing Growth**

Hub Urban Village	Housing Growth 1994-2003	Twenty Year Growth Target	Percentage of Growth Target Met	Zone Capacity	Estimated 2010 Density	Density in 2003
Ballard	1,062	1,520	70%	3,125	17.9	16.5
Bitter Lake Village	285	1,260	23%	5,750	10.3	7.4
Fremont	308	820	38%	950	13.5	12.01
Lake City	542	1,400	39%	2,100	13.3	10.6
North Rainer	138	1,200	12%	3,800	7.8	5.3
<b>South Lake Union</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>1,700</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>15,951</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>2.7</b>
West Seattle Junction	702	1,100	64%	2,500	13	11.3

Housing growth in South Lake Union is roughly in line with projections at the time the plan was adopted. While growth in housing has not experienced the same level of growth that has occurred in jobs, South Lake Union offers the greatest capacity of all Hub Urban Villages to accommodate additional housing growth.

- Housing growth targets for Hub Urban Villages range from 1,062 (Ballard) to 285 (Bitter Lake Village).

- The greatest growth in housing occurred in Ballard which gained 1,062 dwelling units, approximately 70 % of its' twenty-year target. North Rainer achieved the smallest share of its twenty-year target reaching approximately 12% of its twenty-year target.
- Housing growth in South Lake union reached 44% of its twenty-year target.
- Existing zone capacity in South Lake Union would accommodate approximately 15,951 dwelling units, approximately 3 times the next closest Hub Urban Village, Bitter Lake Village, which could accommodate 5,750 dwelling units.
- Both planned and 2003 household density in South Lake Union is the lowest for all Hub Urban Villages. The highest density is in Fremont (12 households per acre) with the second lowest being in North Rainer (5.3 households per acre). Household density in South Lake Union for 2003 is 2.7 households per acre.

### Urban Center Comparison

Job growth in the five urban centers, combined, was 41,901 jobs between 1995 and 2001. This represents 44% of the twenty-year growth target for the Urban Centers. Housing growth for all Urban Centers achieved 33% of their combined twenty-year growth target, gaining 8,830 dwelling units between 1994 and 2003. In the tables below, growth in South Lake Union is compared with the five Urban Centers in the City of Seattle.

**Table 3: Job Growth in Urban Centers**

Urban Center	Net Job Growth 1995-2001	Twenty Year Job Target	Percentage of Job Target Met	Zone Capacity	Estimated 2010 jobs per acre	Jobs per Acre in 2001
1 <sup>st</sup> Hill/Capitol Hill	6,103	11,700	51%	9,400	50	43.3
Downtown Urban Center	28,496	62,700	45%	90,550	241	204
Northgate	1997	9,300	22%	22,650	50	32.6
University	5795	8,500	68%	13,050	52	48.3
Uptown	-490	3,300	-15%	7,700	75	65.6
<b>South Lake Union</b>	<b>5,947</b>	<b>4,500</b>	<b>132%</b>	<b>28,123</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44.2</b>

Comparison of job growth in South Lake Union with the five Urban Centers shows that actual level of growth would rank it below two of the five urban centers. The job growth target for South Lake Union would place it below 4 of the five Urban Centers.

- The greatest growth in jobs occurred in the Downtown Urban Center which gained 28,400 jobs or 45% of its twenty-year target.
- The second greatest gain in jobs was in the 1<sup>st</sup> Hill/Capitol Hill Urban center which gained 6,103 jobs or 51% of its twenty-year target.
- South Lake Union gained more jobs both in absolute numbers and as a percentage of twenty-year growth targets than three of the five Urban Centers.
- South Lake Union has the greatest existing zone capacity for job growth, with the exception of the Downtown Urban Center.
- The concentration of jobs per acre is greater in South Lake Union than it is for the two Urban Centers with the lowest concentration of jobs per acre. The greatest concentration of jobs per acre is in the Downtown Urban Center with 204 jobs per acre. The lowest concentration of jobs per acre is in the Northgate Urban Center with 32.6 jobs per acre. South Lake Union ranks ahead of Northgate and the 1<sup>st</sup> Hill/Capitol Hill Urban Center in terms of jobs per acre.

**Table 4: Housing Growth In Urban Centers**

Urban Center	Housing Growth 1994-2004	Twenty Year Growth Target	Percentage of Growth Target Met	Zone Capacity	Estimated 2010 Density	Actual 2003 Density
1 <sup>st</sup> Hill/Capitol Hill	2618	5540	47%	10,475	30.0	26.6
Downtown Urban Center	5743	14700	39%	17,000	23.4	13.9
Northgate	168	3000	6%	5,150	15.3	8.4
University	836	2110	40%	4,650	17.8	16.1
Uptown	924	1312	70%	2,525	15	13.7
<b>South Lake Union</b>	<b>741</b>	<b>1,700</b>	<b>44%</b>	<b>15,951</b>	<b>4.8</b>	<b>2.7</b>

Comparison of housing growth in the South Lake Union Hub Urban Village shows that it would rank below four of the five Urban Centers. Similarly, its twenty-year target for housing growth also ranks below four of the five Urban Centers. Nevertheless, actual housing growth is comparable to that of two Urban Centers (University and Uptown).

- The Downtown Urban Center gained the greatest number of dwelling units, 5,743 equivalent to 47% of its twenty-year target. Uptown gained a greater share of its twenty-year target, 70%, by gaining 924 dwelling units.
- South Lake Union would rank second lowest in terms of twenty year growth targets when compared to Urban Centers. Zone capacity, however, would place South Lake Union second only to the Downtown Urban Center.
- South Lake Union gained a greater share of its twenty year growth target than three of the five urban centers.
- Housing density in South Lake Union is significantly below density in the five Urban Centers. The greatest density is in the 1<sup>st</sup> Hill/Capitol Hill Urban Center (26.6 Households per acre). The lowest density is in the Northgate Urban Center (8.4 households per acre).

### How Do Urban Centers in Seattle compare with other nearby Urban Centers?

The Puget Sound Regional Council compared growth characteristics of the County's Urban Centers using data from 2000 census. The table below presents some of this information. Included, for comparison purposes, are Seattle's five Urban Centers and four Urban Centers from outside Seattle. Together these Urban Centers are the 9 densest in terms of jobs and housing of the 14 Urban Centers in King County. The four Urban Centers from outside Seattle are Bellevue, Renton, Federal Way, and Everett.

Urban Center	Size (acres)	2000 Housing Density	2000 Employment Density
1st Hill/Capitol Hill	919	24	39
Downtown	938	14	189
University	762	9	43
Northgate	466	7	23
Uptown	305	13	54
Bellevue	432	5	73
Federal Way	241	2	18
Renton	551	2	31
Everett	468	6	23

- None of the Urban Centers outside Seattle have as high a concentration of households per acre as Seattle's five urban centers. The highest concentration of households per acre outside Seattle is found in the Bellevue Urban Center with five dwelling units per acre.
- Bellevue has a higher concentration of jobs per acre than three of Seattle's Urban Centers (University, Uptown, and Northgate). Renton has a higher

concentration of jobs per acre than the two Urban Centers in Seattle with the lowest concentration of jobs per acre.

- South Lake Union has a higher concentration of jobs per acre than all Urban Centers outside of Seattle, with the exception of Bellevue.

### **Should South Lake Union be Designated an Urban Center?**

The character and scale of existing and planned development in South Lake Union are consistent with both a Hub Urban Village designation and an Urban Center designation. While continued growth in jobs and anticipated future growth in housing may result in greater changes in South Lake Union than in other Hub Urban Villages, there is nothing about the current Hub Urban Village designation that would prevent the city from adequately planning for its future growth effectively and efficiently. Household density in South Lake Union is more consistent with the Hub Urban Village classification, however, the concentration of jobs per acre support the idea that South Lake Union is a regional employment center.

Similarly, South Lake Union has grown in a manner and scale consistent with the city's five Urban Centers. Employment growth in South Lake Union has outpaced most of the Urban Centers in County. Importantly, this growth is being spurred by the biotechnology sector and the neighborhood is becoming a regional focus for jobs and housing, consistent with the goals of Urban Centers. Designation of an Urban Center provides a number of incentives and obligations. Among incentives is eligibility for regional transportation resources that are available only to Urban Centers.

In addition to evaluating its role in the City's overall growth management strategy, the question of whether or not South Lake Union should be designated an Urban Center should be based on the degree to which such an action is consistent with the purpose of an Urban Centers and by whether it satisfies the criteria set out in Countywide Planning Policies for becoming an Urban Center.

King County Countywide Planning policies state that Urban Centers are designed to 1) strengthen existing communities, 2) promote housing opportunities close to employment, 3) support development of an extensive transportation system to reduce dependency on automobiles, 4) consume less land with urban development 5) maximize the benefit of public investment in infrastructure and services, 6) reduce costs of any time required for permitting, and 7) evaluate and mitigate environmental impacts. Minimal criteria for designating a neighborhood as an Urban Center include:

- A maximum land area of 1.5 square miles.
- A minimum of 15,000 jobs within one-half mile of a transit center.
- A minimum average of 50 employees per gross acre.
- A minimum average of 15 households per gross acre.



Should South Lake Union be designated an Urban Center, the neighborhood plan will need to be revised to show how this criteria will be satisfied over the life of the plan.

### **Options**

1. Leave existing designation of South Lake Union as a Hub Urban Village in place, but adjust growth targets to reflect likelihood of continued growth in this neighborhood.
2. Designate South Lake Union as an Urban Center. This action would require that the neighborhood plan be revised to accommodate added growth and density consistent with the Urban Center designation.
3. Make South Lake Union part of the Uptown/Queen Anne Urban Center. Like option 2, this would require a revised neighborhood plan for the Uptown Queen Anne Urban Village that would address future growth in South Lake Union.